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Winger, Harry B. oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Harry B. Winger by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Winger, Harry B.

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

July 16, 2003

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 405

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Biographical Note

Harry B. Winger was born in August 1924 in Pulaski, Pennsylvania and grew up there on a farm. He joined the Army Air Corps at the age of seventeen and served as a pilot during World War II. He was shot down and remained a prisoner of war (POW) for eleven months and 23 days, being released when the war ended. He then used his skills and flew for MATS (Military Air Transport Service) for fourteen years. Winger began flying for the Maine Aviation Corporation in 1966, which is when he met Senator Muskie. He flew Senator Muskie around New England for several years, especially during campaigns.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; desire to be a pilot; Army Air Corps; World War II; U.S. Senate campaign and Maine; 1968 vice presidential campaign; and airplane trips with Senator Muskie.

Indexed Names

Hitler, Adolf

Muskie Edmund S., 1914-1996
Muskie, Jane Gray
Nicoll, Don
Winger, Harry B.

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Harry Winger at the Muskie Archives on July 16th, the year 2003, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Mr. Winger, could you start by giving me your full name and spelling it?

Harry Winger: Harry B. Winger, H-A-R-R-Y, B., W-I-N-G-E-R.

AL: And where and when were you born?

HW: I was born in Pulaski, Pennsylvania - - that's near Youngstown, Ohio - - and I was born in the year, August, 1924.

AL: And did you grow up in that area?

HW: I grew up in that area until I went into the United States Army Air Corps at the age of seventeen.

AL: And what was it like in that area of Pennsylvania at that time?

HW: Well, at that time things were flourishing pretty good. The steel mills were producing; Westinghouse, Sharon Steel Corporation had hired many people, and the farming was very good. And that's where I was born and raised, on a farm.

AL: So your parents were farmers.

HW: My parents both were farmers until I left to go into the service, and my father couldn't do it alone at that time, because of his age. So he sold the farm and moved into a small town near Sharon, Pennsylvania.

AL: What kind of farmers were they, was it dairy farm or crops?

HW: Dairy, dairy farm, and he raised his own crops to feed the cows, horses, and so on, and to feed the family.

AL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

HW: I have one sister, five years older than I am.

AL: And what was that community like religiously and economically, was it farming and steel,

were those big economic -?

HW: Primarily that's what it was, farming out in the country and the steel mills were in the cities like Sharon and Farrell, Sharpsville, Pennsylvania had the big steel mills there at the time.

AL: Was there coal mining at all in Pennsylvania?

HW: Some coal mining in this area where I was born and raised. And we got our coal from a place right near where we lived on the farm. And I'd go with my father with the team of horses and wagon to bring our coal back to feed the furnace so we could stay warm during the winter.

AL: And, what year were you born, again?

HW: Nineteen twenty-four.

AL: Nineteen twenty-four, so you saw the Depression come.

HW: I did.

AL: Do you have memories of it?

HW: I do have vague memories of it. I was a small boy, but I remember that if it hadn't been for my father and mother and living on a farm, they fed both of their families off of our farm. And if it hadn't been for that I don't know what would have happened to their families, because they lived in town and there was no work. And we raised crops, raised gardens, raised beef, killed beef, and pigs the same thing, to feed the family. And it was a real Depression.

AL: Now, your going into the service at age seventeen, was that precipitated by the onset of WWII?

HW: Yes, it was. I was deer hunting up in northwestern Pennsylvania and came in to the place where I was staying at night, and the man of the house said to me, he was an invalid but he was in a wheelchair, and he said to me, "Harry, boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom." And I didn't know what he was talking about, and I said, "Well I didn't even get a shot today, I saw no deer." "Oh, no," he says, "the Japanese have dropped bombs on Pearl Harbor." And I dropped my clothes and my gun and everything and I said, "Aha, here we go." And that was where I found it out. But -

AL: Did you already have an interest in flying at that point?

HW: Yes, I did. A little story to that: my dad and mother took me to the county fair and I wanted to ride a pony, and I wanted to buy the pony. And, of course, we had room for it in our barn and we had feed for it, but my dad wouldn't do it, so I, they wouldn't give me a pony ride. So we came to a field where there was a guy with a two-seated airplane giving airplane rides, so I said to my dad, "I want an airplane ride." And he paid for it and up I went and came back down and I told my dad, I said, "Someday I'm going to be a pilot." And I think I was age fifteen

at that time. And when I got to be seventeen, I had to have my father and mother sign for me to go into the service. My dad signed, very happily, because I wanted to go into the Army Air Corps to learn to fly. My mother wouldn't sign. And to this day, and unfortunately my father died and I didn't find out who he took the papers to, but it was some woman's signature of my mother, to get me into the Air Force, Air Corps it was at that time. That's history there, but that started me off right there.

AL: And so did you enjoy the Air Corps?

HW: I loved it very much. And WWII was, we were in Europe at that time fighting with the British on the German side of the ocean. And I got through all of my training and got to, I was sent to a B-17 for training and got a crew and we flew the B-17 to England. And from there on, it was dropping bombs on Mr. Hitler until one day Mr. Hitler decided he wanted me, and I got shot down. My whole crew bailed out, they, we all lived through it. I was ready to bail out but the airplane blew up and blew me out, and I came to floating in mid air and had a parachute on, and that brought me down to the ground safely. And I wound up with the German army and they took care of me after interviews, interviews and interviews, sent me to prison camp for eleven months and twenty-three days, in Germany.

AL: So you were a POW.

HW: Yes, ma'am.

AL: At what point did you come back to the United States, what year?

HW: I came back the 20th of May in 1945, after the war was over in Europe.

AL: And did you go back to Pennsylvania?

HW: I was sent back, yes, I was back at my home to, I had two months rest and recuperation from prison camp, and then I had assignment to go to Miami Beach for further distribution in the Army Air Corps. At that time, the airlines were hiring pilots getting out of WWII. And this buddy of mine wanted to go to the airlines and I said, "I'm going to stay in the Air Force and see the world." Well, unfortunately the buddy of mine that went into United [Airlines] got killed in a mid-air collision over Bryce Canyon, which I felt very bad about, but I fortunately lived through it. And, flying with the United States Air Force, I did get to see practically every country in the world. MATS, Military Air Transport Service, I was with them for fourteen years flying everywhere, and that got me around the world.

AL: So that takes us up to about 1960, doesn't it?

HW: Yes.

AL: And is that the point at which you came to Maine?

HW: I came to Maine in 1960 as the Air Force liaison officer to Civil Air Patrol in the state of

Maine. And I retired in Maine in 1966, and at that time went to work for Maine Aviation Corporation at the Portland Jetport flying charter flights in twin engine, light twin engine airplanes.

AL: And what was that like, did you like doing that after your experience with the Air Force?

HW: Oh yes, it was another job but I liked it very much, because I got to meet different people every day, practically, and the business community. And this is what I was doing at the time that Senator Muskie's office called for an airplane to take him around the state of Maine on a tour. [1970?] He was campaigning for another tour as a senator and I got to fly him quite a bit. And also his family.

AL: Tell me some of the recollections you have of those flights.

HW: Well, all of them were, usually had some little quirk. Nothing serious, nothing that bad, but something. And there were several different ones, like one night I was to take Senator Muskie that I remember very vividly of down to Machias, and he was supposed to speak at the high school in Machias. Well, the weather was bad and Machias didn't have the facilities to bring in airplanes like the Portland Jetport does. So he, I took him to Bar Harbor [Bangor?] and he got a car from Bar Harbor and they drove him to Machias, and I waited at Bar Harbor until he got back. Well, by that time the whole coast of Maine was fogged in. So Senator Ed and I went to Burlington, Vermont and spent the night, because of the bad weather on the coast of Maine. We left Bangor, got out of there fine, but couldn't get back in again because of the weather. So all of those trips with the Senator when he was campaigning usually had something.

The one favorite, I'm going to tell this, on Senator Ed was he'd always come back, regardless of where he had to speak, he'd come back and get in the airplane and he'd always say to me, "Harry, there's got to be a better way to make a living." He says, "Could I fly?" I said, "Everybody can fly, Senator, it just takes time to learn." "Well," he says, "I don't think I can craft that in my schedule now." But that was a favorite one of Senator Ed's, every time he'd come back he always said that to me and I enjoyed it. And I joshed with him all the time, got along very, very nice with him.

AL: Was he personable when he was just one-on-one?

HW: Oh, yes.

AL: Talkative?

HW: Yes, until I got busy on the mike. I had to take care of my own radio work and then he wouldn't. He'd come up, at times came up and sit in the right seat with me where he was very close and we could talk, when he was one-on-one as you said. Usually there were people with him, somebody was with him. If not his wife, somebody else. Not all the time, but usually, but anyway, he was very, very interesting to talk to.

I picked him up one day in Boston, he'd come up from Washington, D.C., and I took him, he was

coming up for a meeting on the Roosevelt Campobello Island which, he chaired that place for the United States. And he said, "It'll be so nice to get up there where I won't have to live in air conditioned rooms." And unfortunately, Maine had a heat wave on, one of those few weeks of the month [*sic* year] that we had a heat wave. Machias was just about as hot as Washington, D.C. was, and there was no air conditioning, he found out later. And of course I knew it; I stayed at a motel in Machias. And they took him over to Campobello Island and that was it. When he came back the next day he said, "Harry, I'm ready to go back to Washington. I'm ready for the air conditioned room." I said, "I know what you mean Senator, it's hot here."

So we ran into things like that, unusual but he coped with it very well. He, I flew he and his family around quite a bit. She went with him with the two children the first time he ran for senator, when I was flying him, which was his second term I think, yes, it was his second term, and the family went with him a lot.

AL: What were your impressions of Jane?

HW: Very nice. I enjoyed talking with Jane, she was very interesting, an interesting person to talk to. And she lived the life of a senator's wife, of which I knew all about from reading. But she was very interested - - in his business, in flying. She shook her head at these small airports we went in and out of in Maine, the short strips, and she said, "You can't do this with a big airplane." And I said, "Oh, no."

When he ran for the VP slot, very nicely, I was retired at that time from the Air Force. But he said to me one day, he cornered me, and I think it was in Dexter, Maine, and he said, "Harry, would you be interested in coming back into the service to fly me if things go right on this election?" I said, "Well, I have to think about that, Senator, I got to go home and talk to my family about that." So I did, I went home, talked to my family, and the family decided that Harry shouldn't go back into the Air Force. It was unanimous and I wasn't all that keen myself on doing it, but it would have been a nice job to fly Senator Muskie as VP of the United States. But I didn't. I told him that I was not interested, and the rest is history.

AL: Who were some of the other people that you flew over those years, do you have recollections, particular stories that stand out?

HW: No, not particular stories. I flew so many lawyers from the city of Portland to various places, flew people from Georgia Pacific Paper Company, but no different stories than I had with Senator Ed. Matter of fact, with him, I had more conversation with him than I did most of the other people I flew, because it was a business deal they were on and they usually were conducting business in the airplane. If there was more than one, they were talking about what they were going to do when they got to their destination, and because of that I didn't get involved. But nice, people, very nice, a bunch of very nice people, but nobody as high up as Senator Ed.

AL: Don Nicoll asked me if you remembered a flight where you took Ed, Jane and Don to New York? If you remember a particular flight.

HW: I don't remember it particularly, was there something that Don said that happened on the flight maybe?

AL: Possibly.

HW: If I knew that, maybe it would jog my memory. But I don't recall specifically of that, no.

AL: Well, did you follow Ed's career as far as, were you interested politically?

HW: In his career, yes I was, very much, because I thought he was an excellent senator. And he would have made an excellent man in the White House, but the people of the country felt differently, of course.

AL: Are there things that I haven't asked you that you feel are important to add in regards to Ed Muskie and your time flying?

HW: No, I think that we've covered it very well. As I said, I got in that one plug about Ed. And he could go to sleep, he'd get in the airplane and he'd be asleep before I'd take off. To rest, to get ready for the next stop and the next speech. And he'd always come in with that, A God, there must be a better way to make a living, Harry, than this. ' And I'd look back two minutes later and he was sleeping. So obviously he could relax with, flying with the airplane he was in and the pilot that was at the controls, or he wouldn't have gone to sleep. Because some people say, "I can't sleep in an airplane, this is too small. I know you're safe, but I can't sleep." But it didn't affect the Senator.

AL: Well great, thank you very much.

HW: I greatly appreciate this, thank you.

End of Interview